

CRACKS IN THE FLAG: A HOME DIVIDED

REDEFINING NATIONAL IDENTITY AND INCLUSIVITY

BY AMILE SHANDU

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amile Shandu is a South African storyteller and an advocate for unity. She is committed to challenge exclusion and amplify unheard voices. Born on the 23rd of November 2005 in Ulundi, the City of Heritage, Amile is a passionate advocate for rethinking national identity and inclusivity.

As a 19 year old currently pursuing a BSc degree in Chemistry and Computer Science at the University of Zululand, she wrote *Cracks in the Flag: A Home Divided* as a way to spark national reflection and push forward conversations on identity, justice, and belonging through the lens of Chidimma's story and countless others like hers.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am not telling this story because I am a victim. I am telling it because many voices have been silenced, ignored, or erased. This book is for the ones who were born here but told they don't belong. For the ones who call South Africa home, yet are made to feel like strangers.

Cracks in the Flag: A Home Divided is my way of holding space for the ones who are not an attack, it is a mirror. Not a complaint but a call.

I write to speak what others cannot.

I write to heal what others will not.

I write because silence helps no one.

*"We are made for togetherness, we are
made for goodness, and we are made
for compassion."*

*"My humanity is bound up in yours, for
we can only be human together."*

—Desmond Tutu

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Scene: Two strangers sit on a bench at a busy taxi rank in Johannesburg. One is an older man in his 60s, the other a young woman in her 20s. They've just witnessed a heated argument where a commuter was told to "go back to your country."

Man:

You know, this country... we survived apartheid. Built a new flag. Sang a new anthem. But still, we tear each other down like enemies.

Woman:

Because maybe the flag was stitched too quickly. We covered the wounds, but we never healed them.

Man (nods slowly):

Now the cracks are showing.

Woman:

But maybe the cracks are where we finally start to see each other. Truly see each other.

Man:

Hmm. Maybe. Maybe that's where the real work begins—through the cracks.

.....

INTRODUCTION

If we truly are Africa's leader, then we must start acting like it, not by building borders in our hearts, but by uniting Africans on our soil. For too long, South Africa's national

identity has been guarded like a fortress. Its gates closed to those who do not "look" or "sound" the part, even when they were born within its walls.

I am here to redefine what it means to be South African. To question the scripts we've been handed about who belongs and who doesn't. To ask: can we build a nation that does not simply tolerate diversity, but treasures it?

This book is not just a critique. It is a call to consciousness, reflection on a country still trying to find itself in the shadows of its past. Through personal stories, cultural flashpoints, and national conversations, I invite you to walk with me through the cracks in the flag, those spaces where pain and possibility coexist. Because in the end, identity is not about exclusion, it is about connection.

Through **seven chapters**, I explore identity, exclusion, beauty, legality, and the unfinished journey of reconciliation in South Africa. My goal was not to speak *for* anyone, but to speak *with* and *alongside* those who are often unheard, voices pushed to the margins of the national story.

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CHAPTER ONE: Born Here Not From Here

I was raised to believe that being South African meant something powerful, something proud. We were the children of freedom, our generation meant to inherit the rainbow nation. But what happens when that rainbow fades? When some of its colours are pushed questioned, or told they don't belong?

I remember sitting in my school assembly, hand on my chest, singing the national anthem with conviction. We sang in five languages, were told we were one people. But even as a child, I could feel the quiet separations the glances, the questions, the subtle ways so us were reminded we were not quite "from here," even if we had never known any other home.

It began with a name on a list. Eleven young women were named finalists in the 2024 Miss South Africa competition, each with a dream. But for one of them, that announcement marked not a rise, but a fall. What should have been a celebration of beauty, resilience, and ambition became a lightning rod for one of South Africa's most deep-seated issues: who belongs.

She was born in Soweto. Raised in South African schools. She was singing the national anthem without stumbling and navigating the complex cultural codes of this land with ease. But she had a name that came from Nigeria, a father born beyond the Limpopo, and a mother from Mozambique. And that, for many, was enough to make her a

foreigner.

Social media turned savage. The attacks were not critiques of her talent or character, but assaults on her right to exist in this space. "You are not one of us," they wrote. "Go back to your country." Though her birthplace, her memories, her community, and her identity could be erased by a surname.

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The backlash revealed the fragile nature of South African identity. Our Constitution may preach inclusivity. Our national symbols declare unity in diversity. But on the streets and screens, in townships and town halls, another truth lingers: the post-apartheid promise of belonging is unevenly delivered.

Being a woman in South Africa already comes with layers of vulnerability. Add to that the burden of contested nationality, and the weight becomes nearly unbearable. When women of foreign descent rise, their achievements are often met with suspicion, their progress with resistance. It is a gendered form of xenophobia, where success becomes a threat and identity a weapon.

To be South African, it seems, is to fit into a mould defined not by paperwork, but by perception. And when that perception is shaped by years of economic inequality, fractured memory, and cultural gatekeeping, belonging becomes conditional. This chapter, and this book, begins by holding up a mirror to that condition. What does it truly mean to be South African? Who decides? And who gets excluded in the process?

The answers are not easy. But the questions are urgent.

CHAPTER TWO: The Uitlander Legacy

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CHAPTER TWO: The Uitlander Legacy

Before we can fully grasp the present, we must first look back. In the late 19th century, South Africa was already a place of boundaries and exclusions. The term "uitlander", meaning outsider, was used by the Boer republics to describe British immigrants who came seeking fortune in the gold mines of the Transvaal.

These uitlanders were white, European, and often wealthy, but they were still denied political rights and social acceptance. Their presence threatened the cultural and economic control of the Afrikaners. Over time, the faces have changed. The tools of exclusion have not.

We still use the language of borders to define who belongs and who does not. But now, the targets are Black African immigrants, people who look like us, sound like us, and live among us, but are treated as perpetual outsiders. Xenophobia has replaced colonial suspicion. The legacy of uitlander thinking has mutated, but it has not disappeared.

In post-apartheid South Africa, one might expect unity to be the default mode. But the trauma of our past has made unity fragile. Citizens feel that their hard-won rights are under threat from corruption, from poverty, from inequality. And in that fear, scapegoats are found. "They are taking our jobs." "They flood our healthcare system." "They don't respect our ways."

These accusations are not new. They are echoes. Echoes of old divisions that thrived on hierarchy and division. In colonial times, race was a key divider. In apartheid, race and language. Today, it's national accent, even surname. Xenophobia in South Africa cannot be separated from our historical need to classify and rank human beings.

We inherited a country built on the idea that some people matter more than others. And though our Constitution tried to break that foundation, the cracks remain. These divisions are not abstract. They shape lives. Immigrant-owned shops are looted. Foreign national students denied basic services. Children born to African parents on South African soil are labelled “stateless.”

This is not just about policy. It's about perception. About who we believe deserves dignity. And so, the legacy of the uitlander lives not just in government offices, but in everyday conversations. In the side-eyes on buses. In the unspoken rules of inclusion. In the assumption that only some get to call this place home.

We cannot build a united nation while part of that nation lives in pain. We cannot wave our flag proudly while hiding the hurt behind closed doors. A dream of a home divided will never match the power of a home united. But first, we must name the divisions. We must understand where they come from. Only then can we begin the work of healing.

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CHAPTER THREE: Home

Not a Border

To understand what it means to belong in South Africa today, ask: what makes a home? Is it a place on a map? A birth certificate? A shared history? Or is it something deeper connection, memory? In the stories I've heard from children of immigrants, home is not a border but a feeling. It's the scent of pap and chakalaka from a neighbour's pot.

It's dancing to Brenda Fassie on a summer afternoon. It's standing in a long line to vote, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, all dreaming of a life that's better. And yet, that feeling is fragile. It is challenged by bureaucracy, by politics, by prejudice. One young man told me he was born in Durban, but when he applied for university, he was told to apply as an international student. His parents fled conflict in the DRC, but they never set foot there.

"I only know South Africa," he said. "But they say it's not enough." Another woman shared how her Zimbabwean surname caused university interviewers to question her loyalty, her qualifications, even her right to apply. "They say I'm not local," she said, "but I was born here and I speak isiZulu better than they do."

Stories like these are not rare. They are the quiet norm for thousands of people. And still, these individuals continue to build this country through their work, their teaching in our schools, healing in our clinics, innovating in our tech spaces. Their lives are stitched into the national fabric, yet they are treated as outsiders.

loose threads. Home is not just about origin. It's about investment, contribution, memory, pain, joy.

Our national narrative needs to shift from one that polices belonging to one that protects it. From a culture of suspicion to a culture of solidarity. In every anthem sung, every flag raised, there is an invitation: to belong. The question is, will we answer it only for some or for all?

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Because if we continue to divide the house, the cracks will grow. A home divided cannot stand. Let this chapter be a call not just to recognize the cracks but to start filling them with truth, empathy, and shared purpose.

CHAPTER FOUR: Rainbow Cracks — National Symbols and Their Shortcomings

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CHAPTER FOUR: Rainbow Cracks — National Symbols and Their Shortcomings

In 1994, as the old regime gave way to the promise of democracy, South Africa unfurled a new flag, sang a new anthem, and adopted a new set of arms. These symbols were meant to represent a turning point, visual and verbal affirmations of unity, freedom, and a shared future. But over time, they have become canvases onto which many project not only hope, but disillusionment.

The rainbow nation was a beautiful idea. It suggested a country where differences were not only accepted but celebrated. But ideas, like flags, can fade with time. For many who were born after 1994, the so-called “born frees”, the rainbow sometimes feels more like a mirage than a reality. National symbols might still flutter high above government buildings, but for those who feel excluded by policy or prejudice, they often ring hollow.

When the national anthem plays, some stand tall, hand on chest. Others feel the weight of a promise unfulfilled. When we see the flag, it should unite us. But for many, it reminds them of the ways they are still seen as outsiders. These symbols, intended to bind us together, sometimes deepen the divide when not everyone is included in their meaning.

Why do these symbols fall short? Because symbols are only as strong as the stories we tell around them. And too often, the stories of immigrants and marginalized communities, of people seen as “not quite South African,” are erased or side-lined. The anthem may include multiple languages, but whose voices are truly heard in our public discourse?

National identity must be more than symbolic. It must be lived, felt, and reinforced through policy, culture, and community. Without action, symbols risk becoming aesthetic relics, pretty, but powerless. To restore their meaning, we must ensure they reflect the full spectrum of South African life, not just the idealized version.

There’s also the danger of weaponizing symbols. When national identity is policed through who sings the anthem “properly,” who wears the flag, or who speaks the “right” language, we turn symbols into gatekeepers.

instead of bridges. This is how unity gets distorted into conformity how diversity is painted as a threat rather than a strength.

Yet, symbols still hold power. They can be reclaimed. The same flag waves over protests against injustice is the one sewn during reconciliation. It's not the cloth, but the cause it represents, that must evolve. It's in our hands to ensure our symbols are inclusive, living representations of who we are and who we strive to be.

This chapter explores how national symbols can both inspire and exclude and how we might reclaim their power by confronting the realities they often mask. Because when the rainbow cracks, we must ask: what lies beneath it, and what can we build from the pieces?

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CHAPTER FIVE: Race, Beauty, and Belonging

In a country shaped by centuries of racial division, beauty has never been just about aesthetics. It has always been political. Who is seen as beautiful, who is elevated, who is celebrated. These questions are deeply entangled with race, history, and power.

When a woman of African heritage steps onto a public stage, especially one as visible as Miss South Africa, she is not just judged on poise or appearance. She is scrutinized for her accent, her surname, her origins. The pageant becomes a microcosm of our national anxieties. Who gets to represent us? Who is “real” enough to wear the sash?

The backlash against contestants with foreign backgrounds is not about beauty, it’s about belonging. And more than that, it reveals a narrow definition of South African identity. One that clings to outdated ideas of what a “South African” should look or sound like. This harms not only individuals but our collective growth.

Race adds another layer. In post-apartheid South Africa, Blackness is a monolith, yet it is often treated as such. A Black South African and a Zimbabwean may share history, language, even struggle but are still divided by national lines. This artificial division erodes solidarity and reinforces racial hierarchies within Black communities.

The idea of beauty is not just about skin tone, but about representation and validation. When public spaces like runways, magazine covers, newsrooms are dominated by a narrow vision of beauty, they silence the rest of us we’re not enough. That message trickles down into schools, homes, and hearts.

Yet we've seen glimmers of change. Natural hair campaigns. Dark-skinned models gaining global attention. Artists and influencers using their platforms to challenge beauty norms. These are more than trends, they are acts of reclamation, declarations that say: I am enough, as I am.

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We must broaden our definition of beauty and, by extension, our understanding of representation. True representation is not about ti boxes, it's about telling stories that are diverse, honest, and reflective of our reality. When a child sees someone who looks like them in a po of visibility and power, it sends a message: you belong.

Belonging begins with visibility. But it flourishes through affirmatio chapter calls us to look closer, not just at what we define as beautif at what those definitions say about who we are, and who we welcom our shared story.

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CHAPTER SIX: The Lega vs. The Lived

Citizenship is often defined by law—by borders, documents, and bureaucratic checkboxes. But lived identity tells a more complex story. It speaks of where you grew up, what you eat, the slang you speak, and the neighbours who shaped your childhood.

In South Africa, these two versions of identity, legal and lived often clash. A person may be born in the country, speak all its languages, and live by its rhythms, yet still be labelled a foreigner due to the technicalities of citizenship and paperwork. Meanwhile, others may hold citizenship by birth right but feel alienated in their own land due to ethnicity, class, or language.

This disconnect is not just frustrating, it is dehumanizing. Legal status should not negate lived experience. And yet, for many children of immigrants, their existence is questioned every time they apply for health services, or a job. They are asked to prove a connection that is already be obvious.

The legal system, while necessary, is not neutral. It often reflects and reinforces societal biases. Immigration policies, ID regulations, and enforcement can all be tools of exclusion when not applied with care and equity. Worse still, these tools are sometimes weaponized during times of political unrest, turning neighbours into suspects.

What's more, the consequences of being labelled "illegal" go beyond paperwork. They affect a person's dignity, access, and sense of self-worth. Children internalize rejection. Adults live in fear. Families become secretive about their roots, teaching their children to hide instead of celebrate their heritage.

This impacts more than individuals, it impacts how we build society. When lived identity is dismissed in favour of rigid categories, we lose out on the richness of hybridity, of cross-cultural insight, of authentic inclusion. We trade connection for control.

A truly inclusive nation does not wait for identity to be rubber-stamped. It recognizes it in the heartbeat of daily life. We call for a new definition of belonging, one that honors the lived just as much as the legal. And in doing so, we remember that a home is not just where you were born, but where you are welcomed.

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What's more, the consequences of being labelled "illegal" go beyond paperwork. They affect a person's dignity, access, and sense of self-worth. Children internalize rejection. Adults live in fear. Families become secretive about their roots, teaching their children to hide instead of celebrate their heritage.

This impacts more than individuals, it impacts how we build society. When lived identity is dismissed in favour of rigid categories, we lose out on the richness of hybridity, of cross-cultural insight, of authentic inclusion. We trade connection for control.

A truly inclusive nation does not wait for identity to be rubber-stamped. It recognizes it in the heartbeat of daily life. We call for a new definition of belonging, one that honors the lived just as much as the legal. And in doing so, we remember that a home is not just where you were born, but where you are welcomed.

CHAPTER SEVEN: What Does Reconciliation Really Mean?

Since the end of apartheid, “reconciliation” has been the cornerstone of South Africa’s national narrative. It is etched into speeches, commemorations, and school curricula. But more than two decades on, we must ask: what has reconciliation truly achieved?

True reconciliation requires truth. Not just the truths of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but the ongoing, uncomfortable truths of inequality, exclusion, and systemic neglect. Have we confronted them fully or have we buried them beneath symbolic gestures?

For many, reconciliation has felt like a demand to move on without healing. It has been framed as forgiveness without justice, peace without equity. And while some bridges have been built, many wounds remain open, especially among those who feel like guests in their own country. This is particularly true for immigrant communities and their children.

They are often left out of the national dialogue around reconciliation, though their pain doesn’t count, as though their voices are not part of the healing process. But how can we reconcile if we do not include everyone in the conversation?

Reconciliation is not a finish line; it’s a process. It demands accountability, not just amnesia. It means recognizing that past harm bleeds into the present and sometimes into policy. It means engaging with uncomfortable realities, even when it would be easier to look away.

Healing takes time and it takes trust. Reconciliation without representation is hollow. If we are to rebuild, we must rebuild together with transparency, equity, and honesty. This includes redefining who gets to participate in national healing.

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Healing takes time and it takes trust. Reconciliation without representation is hollow. If we are to rebuild, we must rebuild together with transparency, equity, and honesty. This includes redefining who gets to participate in national healing.

Reconciliation must be ongoing. It must be tangible. It must mean more than memorials. It must mean policy change, inclusive education, and grassroots solidarity. It must involve everyone, not just those in power and those in pain. Only then can we move from coexisting to truly living together. And perhaps then, the idea of “home” can stretch wide enough to hold us all.

CONCLUSION:

South Africa has never been just one story. It has always been many layered, complex, and often conflicting. This book began with Chidimma's story, but it ends with a broader question: **who are we becoming?** We are a nation born of struggle and built on the dream of unity, yet still wrestling with who belongs and who decides. Our history casts a long shadow, and the cracks in our flag are not signs of failure, they are signs of truth.

They reveal the work that still needs to be done. They challenge us to go deeper into what identity, citizenship, and community really mean in the everyday lives of people who live between categories. Chidimma's journey is not unique. It is shared by thousands of young people across this country—South African by birth, by culture, by contribution, yet constantly made to prove it. Their stories expose the fragile threads of belonging, and remind us that legality without inclusion, visibility without respect, and symbols without substance will never be enough.

But there is hope in the cracks. Because cracks let the light in. Cracks force us to confront the discomfort we often avoid. And cracks offer space for rebuilding, this time stronger, more honest, and more inclusive. So, who are we becoming? That answer is still being written. But if we dare to look at the cracks not as flaws, but as calls to action, we might just become a home where every voice matters, and every life is full.

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If this book resonated with you, challenged your thinking, or reflected part of your story, I would love to hear from you. Let's continue the conversation of redefining national identity and building a more inclusive home.


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